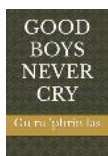


## REVIEW: *GOOD BOYS NEVER CRY*

BY GU RU 'PHRIN LAS གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས།\*

Reviewed by Gengqiugelai (更求格来, Konchok Gelek, Dkon mchog dge legs དཀོན་མཆོག་དགེ་ལགས།) University of Zurich



Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立). 2022. *Good Boys Never Cry*. KDP: <https://bit.ly/3jeA71X>. ASIN BoBL99M12L, ISBN-13 979-8361620401. Paperback 201 pp. USD9.66.

Tibetans from a pastoral background in China have been writing literature in English for a relatively short time and, with some notable exceptions, there isn't much of it.<sup>1</sup> This alone makes *Good Boys Never Cry* by Gu ru 'phrin las important, but there are other reasons, too, which I address.

Gu ru's stories (and one script) in this collection may be placed in three categories: the pre-modern, a time of transition, and young Tibetans in contemporary urban settings. Stories in the first category include "A Pregnant Boy," "Seven Years," "Fickle Love," and "Girl With A Tail." These stories concern Tibetan life in tents, natural disasters, and their consequences as they deal with theft, masculinity, and religious belief.

A time of transition features twelve stories: "The Boy," "A New Family," "A Good Boy," "A Herdswoman," "Her," "No Escape," "Couples," "Is Age Just A Number?," "Golden Town Restaurant," "Big Mouth Kids," "An Abandoned House," and "The Patron." They focus on gender inequality, imperfect marriages, family honor, and arranged marriages.

Finally, five texts concern young Tibetans living in cities: "Saturday," "Love at Dream Lake," "A Bad, Unkind Man?" "An

---

\* Gengqiugelai (Konchok Gelek, Dkon mchog dge legs). 2023. Review: *Good Boys Never Cry* by Gu ru 'phrin las. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 63:472-476.

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include Rin chen rdo rje (2011), Sonam Doomtso (2011), Karma Dondrub (2013), Chos bstan rgyal (2014), Pema Kyi (2015), Sangs rgyas bkra shis et al. (2015), Tsering Bum (2016), Klu thar rgyal et al. (2020), Klu thar rgyal et al. (2020), and Klu thar rgyal (2021).

Unclean Bloodline?" and "The Painting" (a script).

I will now comment on one story from each of these categories. In "A Pregnant Boy," a father leaves for Lha sa with tribal companions to trade. Floodwater sweeps the family's livestock into the Yellow River in his absence. Time passes, and starvation looms. The mother and her son's usual diet is meat, dairy products, and a limited supply of barley flour. Having lost all their livestock and thus their main food supply, the desperate mother leaves with her son to find her brother living in another tribe. She injures her leg on the way and cannot walk for some days. Their only food, a meager supply of barley flour, is nearly exhausted when she recovers enough to walk. The boy's belly is swollen from severe malnutrition (explaining the story's title). Eventually, they find refuge in a Tibetan camp. The return of the boy's father happily concludes this story.

"Big Mouth Kids" deals with spousal abuse. Sayyangtso<sup>1</sup> observes her drunken neighbor, Kneejep, grab his wife's hair and beat her while she is on the ground. Later, Sayyangtso comes home for lunch from herding her family's yaks on a mountain and finds her mother sobbing with a severely swollen cheek. Her mother later tells her, "Don't tell others your father beat me" (124) because it would damage the family's reputation, highlighting the pressure on Tibetan wives to remain silent about the physical abuse they suffer from their husbands.

"Saturday," in the third category, focuses on university student life in urban settings, including vivid descriptions of gym activity, graphic city street dramas, and how random encounters on a bus radically alter initial impressions of people.

This compilation of real and imagined, at times nostalgic, memories is rooted in a nomadic tribe experiencing rapid social transition from mobile pastoralism to a partially sedentary way of life as black yak-hair tents are replaced by permanent housing and manufactured tents. A new mundane emerges with motorcycles and

---

<sup>1</sup> The author employs phoneticized versions of his Mgo log (Guoluo) Tibetan dialect for Tibetan names and terms. These terms and their Wylie and Tibetan script equivalents are presented at the end of the book.

automobiles replacing walking, horseback and yakback riding, and smartphones and television irrevocably impacting social connections, further defining a newfangled normal. The details of the circumstances of these collective memories and experiences are fresh enough to be vividly and realistically described, especially by the writer Gu ru 'phrin las, who has a lived Tibetan pastoralist background. His important *Remembering Tomorrow* and its collective memories of Tibetans in herding groups raised in black yak-hair tents testify to his background and qualifications in authentically portraying Tibetan pastoral life.

When public social security was absent, sworn brothers, rifles, and horseback riders were de-facto admirable problem-solving solutions in this pre-modern society where life was precarious. The father and brother in "Seven Years" demonstrate their masculinity with violence. "Good boys never cry" is more than a phrase to hush boys' tears in its poignant capturing of one of the many painful steps from boyhood to manhood. In sharp contrast, this traditional society offers girls and women a social norm without independent qualities. For example, "A good girl listens to her parents, like Lhamo, who earned the greatest woman award in our community," (64) illustrates how parents' wishes can act as obstacles, even deterrents, to a woman wishing to pursue her dreams and happiness ("A New Family").

Other social norms are also revealed. For example, a family with no man is discriminated against as the family seeks to find marriage partners for the daughters and establish relations with others. Another time, a masculine hairdo and a girl's manly comportment substitute for the absence of a man in a family ("An Unclean Bloodline?"). In "The Patron," despite withstanding a sequence of unfortunate fates, including her parents' divorce when she was a very young child, her husband's death, no children, and malicious local gossip, an independent restaurant owner continues to endure long, cold, lonely nights.

These powerful stories have important insights and implications. For example, the stories' cultural and linguistic integration of young Tibetans in Chinese cities and amalgamation into mainstream society ("The Painting") deliberately avoid

expressing Tibetan and Han identities, giving a sense of diminishing ethnic individuality among Tibetan university students. An example is Tenzin Jinba's provocative questions among the prefatory blurbs:

If nomadic life, often embodying idealized Tibetan mobility, freedom, spirituality, happiness, and masculinity, withdraws from the historical stage, what will the "Tibetan spirit" be? What will make Tibetans Tibetan?

I highly recommend this collection and its valuable ethnographic observations to readers wishing to learn more about contemporary challenges confronting pastoralists and Tibetan life from the early twenty-first century to today.

## REFERENCES

- Chos bstan rgyal ཚོས་བསྟན་རྒྱལ། 2014. Following the Herds: Rhythms of Tibetan Pastoral Life in A mdo. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 32.  
<https://bit.ly/2J6ulKd> 19 December 2022
- Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立). 2019. Remembering Tomorrow. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 56.  
<http://bitly.ws/xYWX> 19 December 2022
- Karma Dondrub ཀར་མ་དོན་བླུ་བ། 2013. Tibetan Nomad Childhood. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 26.  
<https://bit.ly/33zxf3G> 19 December 2022
- Klu thar rgyal ལུ་ཐར་རྒྱལ། 2021. *Hopes, Gatherings, and New Beginnings: An A mdo Tibetan New Year in 2018*.  
[bit.ly/3XHtcyj](https://bit.ly/3XHtcyj) 7 July 2023
- with CK Stuart and Sami Honkasalo. 2020. Last Memories – A mdo Tibetan Tribal Lives: Rdor Jag and Thang ta. *Asian Highland Perspectives* 59.  
<https://bit.ly/2xetCEi> 19 December 2022
- Pema Kyi པེ་མ་རྒྱུ་ལྷོ། 2015. The Witches of Tibet. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 38.  
<https://bit.ly/33ACujH> 19 December 2022

- Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ།. 2011. A Ngawa Tibetan Nomad Childhood. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 9.  
<https://bit.ly/2QBVqsX> 19 December 2022
- Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱལ་བཀྲ་ཤིས།, Qi Huimin 祁慧民, and CK Stuart. 2015. An A mdo Tibetan Auto-song-ography. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 39. <https://bit.ly/2UmlzwY>  
19 December 2022
- Sonam Doomtso བསོད་ནམས་དུང་མཚོ། 2011. A Tibetan Nomad Girl's Changing Worlds. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 19.  
<https://bit.ly/3djs7oB> 19 December 2022
- Tsering Bum ཚེ་རིང་འབུམ།. 2013. A Northeastern Tibetan Childhood. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 27.  
<https://bit.ly/33BjXDL> 19 December 2022
- . 2016. Guardians of Nature: Tibetan Pastoralists and the Natural World. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 42.  
<https://bit.ly/3a85Bo5> 19 December 2022

## TIBETAN TERMS

Guhretrinlee, gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།  
Kneejep, gnas skyabs ཀན་ཇེཔ་སྐྱབས།  
Konchok Gelek, dkon mchog dge legs ངཀོ་ཅེ་མཚོ་ག་དགེ་ལགས།  
Lha sa, lha sa ལྷ་ས།  
Lhamo, lha mo ལྷ་མོ།  
Mgo log, mgo log མགོ་ལོག།  
Sayyangtso, tshe g.yang mtsho ཚེ་གཡང་མཚོ།  
Tenzin Jinba, bstan 'dzin sbyin pa བཞུན་འཛིན་སྤྱིན་པ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Gengqiugelai 更求格来  
Gerichengli 格日成立  
Guoluo 果洛